DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 314 FL 800 328

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TITLE	Literacy for a Global Economy: A Multicultural Perspective. Conference Proceedings (El Paso, Texas, February 1990).
INSTITUTION	Education Writers Association, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Feb 90
NOTE	29p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Literacy; Delivery Systems; Federal Programs; *Global Approach; Instructional Materials; *Literacy Education; Material Development; Policy Formation; Program Descriptions; Program Evaluation; *Public Policy; Student Needs; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Biliteracy; El Paso Community College TX; Workplace Literacy

ABSTRACT

A February 1990 meeting, held at El Paso Community College (Texas) honoring language and cultural diversity in the adult literacy field is summarized. The report describes the conference's tour activities sampling local cultural sites, presents "quotable quotes" of participants and leaders, and reviews the issues and trends in literacy education discussed in conference sessions. These issues include the following: (1) the need to balance workplace needs and learner needs; (2) lack of attention to the theoretical base for literacy education; (3) lack of understanding about family literacy and funding factors; (4) inadequacy of the delivery system; (5) appropriate use of the current opportunity for sound policy-making, program planning, and instructional material development; (6) the interest of business in literacy education; (7) program assessment and accountability; (8) bi-literacy and policies promoting "linguistic racism"; (9) a variety of successful literacy programs around the country; (10) the next steps to be taken in developing literacy education; and (11) local programs in which El Paso Community College is involved. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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LITERACY FOR A GLOBAL ECONOMY

A Multicultural Perspective

February 1990

Conference Proceedings

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LITERACY FOR A GLOBAL ECONOMY: A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

"We cannot separate literacy from experience, from culture and traditions."

These words were part of the beginning of a unique conference attended by experts in and advocates for an honoring of language and cultural diversity in the adult literacy field. For the 200 participants at the February 1990 meeting in El Paso, the setting and the issues discussed exemplified the context of literacy eloquently stated above by Hanna Arlene Fingeret. It was a moving experience to be together. The conference took place in a strongly bicultural border community. It was a time to share El Paso's traditions and hopefully begin a new tradition--that of coming together regularly to preserve and expand multicultural diversity in American society.

"We want to deal with the issues passionately," Carol Clymer, director of the Literacy Education Action program of the El Paso Community College, told the opening session of the conference. There was no doubt about that. For three days the participants discussed, debated, shared program successes and expressed concerns--always with passion and commitment to language and cultural diversity.

The timing was as significant as the setting. As literacy for all adults becomes a national goal and a focus of Congressional action, it also becomes a tool for other national priorities, such as economic competitiveness, and subject to traditional accountability measures. Without broadly inclusive definitions and a respect for language/cultural diversity, the adult literacy movement could be too narrowly conceived, the participants feared. Thus, they believed the sense of the conference had a message for the adult literacy field in general and for local, state and national policymakers.

Bi-literacy is a worthwhile, even necessary, goal for American society, the conference participants informally concluded. And, they added, there is no more logical place to begin

than in fostering multi-language, multi-cultural diversity among adult learners.

TOURS COMBINE LITERACY, CULTURAL SAMPLING

Early arrivals to the "Literacy for a Global Economy" conference had a choice of tours that took them into the mountains, across the border, up the valley, or onto an Indian reservation. The sample of cultural sites in the El Paso area each included a literacy focus, combined with time to get acquainted over a meal or shopping sidetrip.

The group driving to Franklin Mountain, for example, crossed over a major mountain pass, visited the El Paso Community College Literacy Center and educational programs at Fort Bliss. Those who crossed the border to Juarez stopped to visit the market downtown and eat at a popular restaurant, then drove through the maquiladora area to a plant manufacturing disposal surgical clothing. A thorough tour of the plant was followed by an informative discussion with personnel about working conditions and education programs offered employees.

Others took the mission trails tour to the Tigua Indian Reservation, various missions in the area, and the workplace literacy program at the rural J & J Register plant; and through Mesilla Valley in New Mexico to visit the San Miguel Community Center and literacy programs in Old Mesilla.

QUOTES THAT CAN BE USED THROUGHOUT TEXT

"I came to have a better understanding of what is meant by cultural freedom and using literacy as a means to gain that freedom."

Carol Clymer

"Why do we have to prove what we are doing makes sense when those who ask for proof have been running programs that don't work for decades?"

Participant

"Illiterates are the largest, fastest growing sub-culture in our society. There are 60 million of us out there who don't get to play the game."

John Corcoran

"We are tired of the usual speeches from Anglos who have no understanding of our culture. They push programs on us, like drug and alcohol abuse, but what we want are literacy programs. And we don't have them."

Navajo participant

"If adults in literacy programs confront the same symbolic violence as they met in school, they will leave the programs again and not come back."

Donaldo Macedo

SETTING THE SCENE--AND THE CHALLENGE

From the threat of "assembly-line literacy" imposed from the outside to the weaknesses of the literacy field on the inside, the messages brought to the conference on Literacy for a Global Economy by national experts were provocative and challenging.

Major speakers agreed on the principles embodied in a multicultural literacy perspective. However, they took different paths to their conclusions.

"Let Us Gather Blossoms Under Fire..."

Keynote speaker Hanna Arlene Fingeret set the stage for the rest of the conference. Director of Literacy South at Raleigh, N.C., and a prominent proponent of empowerment of learners, she chose a quote from writer Alice Walker to describe her message--"let us gather blossoms under fire."

There is a growing dichotomy, she said, between those who believe that literacy programs should respond to the unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students and those who promote mainstream literacy programs which overlook these backgrounds.

We are here to break taboos," Fingeret said. Those at the conference believe in mutual respect and dignity for learners, she pointed out, but "we are struggling to maintain our commitment to multiculturalism" amid pressures pushing in the opposite direction. These include support for the industrial model of cost effectiveness and efficiency; goals decided upon by employers, rather than in partnership with workers; and "by the dominant class rather than by all classes, by whites rather than by all the rainbow, by males rather than by all persons."

Drawing from her own personal experience in trying to learn to drive a tractor from a manual, Fingeret described the frustration of not being able to use the tools of learning until she had acquired meaning through experience.

"Literacy is fundamentally about meaning," she said. "It results from our interaction

with the world and the text. As we read our world, expand our experience, we reconstruct the meaning of text. And as we read the word, we transform our world. Language and culture shape the meanings we attach to experience and to text."

The pressure to standardize, formalize and normalize learning results from "unequal" meanings, Fingeret explained. Schools, for example, transmit the meanings most useful to maintain the status quo. Workplace literacy programs too often teach employers' meanings. Family literacy programs are teaching the schools' meanings.

"This orientation to teaching students other people's meanings is important because power stems from our own experience--our own meanings," Fingeret contended. "When literacy programs help students come to know, reflect upon and express their own meanings, we help students come into their power."

Accountability can be gained, not by standardized tests, but by asking learners what they need to know and what they are learning. "We must build a system in which every person is heard," she advised.

"If we are to work effectively together, we must be clear that respect for cultural and linguistic background is not simply a matter of motivating, titillating, interesting, recruiting, or retaining," Fingeret concluded. "It has to do with dignity, power, strength, and authority. We cannot separate literacy from experience, from culture and traditions."

A Can-Do Philosophy

Urging that those who advocate multicultural perspectives focus on what learners can do rather than what they cannot do, JoAnn "Jodi" Crandall presented demographic and research data to support this view. Director of the new National Clearinghouse for Literacy Education for Limited-English Proficient Adults, Crandall described for a luncheon session how the United States was becoming "the first universal nation in the world."

Hispanics and Asians are the fastest growing sub-populations in the country, with an annual influx of more than one million immigrants from the two groups combined. In addition, there are almost three million people now eligible for amnesty; among them are a growing number of immigrants from Europe and Africa. By the end of the decade, predicted

Crandall, 53 of the nation's largest metropolitan areas will have a majority of their populations which are language minority.

This is the "fear" of those who support such movements as English Only, she said. But, "those of us involved in multicultural literacy should be happy. The demographic trends will add immeasurably to our national heritage."

Yet, Crandall described language policy in this country as "absurd." She noted that children come to school "speaking hundreds of languages, many of which our government says are critical. We give them three years to learn English and forget their own language, then in eighth grade tell them to learn a foreign language." Research supporting learning to read in one's own language in order to learn to read English well is consistent across all age groups, she added. Also, an emphasis upon phonics forces learners into "being a blank slate, ignoring what learners bring into classrooms."

Promising practices for younger students hold lessons for adults. Crandall mentioned bi-language classes and schools, where all students take one-half of each day in other languages. Research shows that within two years, bilingual students in these classes are outperforming monolingual students in math and reading.

Rather than "exploiting" language-minority populations, as is the current mode, policies and programs should "respect where learners are." A whole language approach is the primary base of successful literacy programs for language minorities, Crandall said. Other examples of successful components include the sharing of reading and writing among learners; and dialogue journals, or written conversations between students and teachers or among students. This type of journal writing, Crandall explained, "puts the learner in control." A teacher responds with language just beyond the level of the entry so that his/her strategies are developmental tools, not strictly instructional tools. "You can't teach adults with a red pencil," she said emphatically.

Crandall listed the general characteristics of effective literacy programs for language minorities--they are learner centered, interactive, combine oral and written development, and communicate about meaningful knowledge/information.

Good News and Bad News Trends

The issues and trends in adult literacy underscore the need for greater efforts at bringing workplace needs and the needs of learners into better balance, Larry Mikulecky told the closing session of conference. Professor of education at Indiana University, Mikulecky had both hopeful and troublesome news for the adult literacy field, drawn primarily from his studies for the U.S. Department of Labor.

The approach to literacy, Mikulecky said, has changed considerably in just the past five years. It has gone from primarily a teacher-learner issue to a major social change, with accompanying expansion of resources. The voices of those closest to the concerns of adult learners "are being drowned out by those who think they know better and now have the money to try to prove it," he said. However, the rapid growth of adult literacy as an issue and program focus is leading to ambitious goals "and tremendous mistakes." For example, school policies use pull-out programs for poor readers, despite indication that they do more harm than good, but ignore the need to address the loss of reading ability during the summer months.

Mikulecky listed five major issues/problems in adult literacy:

o Lack of attention to the theoretical base for literacy instruction. Federal officials in the Departments of Education and Labor "hardly ever think about literacy theories," a fact which may account for unrealistic expectations from programs. Take the problem of the length of time needed to achieve language proficiency. The best programs require 100 or more hours to get a person to the point of being able to read a newspaper, Mikulecky said, and inefficient programs may require up to 1,000 hours of instruction. "In five to 10 years from now, we will look back and say how naive we were to have expected to turn around the literacy problem with such little investment and knowledge about adult learners," he predicted.

o Lack of understanding about family literacy. Research has not been sufficient, Mikulecky claimed, to show that intergenerational programs are successful. Apparently, he said, they do not provide enough practice. Further, cultural issues have been overlooked. What cultural strengths can be built upon to improve reading? Mikulecky warned that there is a "dark side" to some cultural traits, such as some choices for leisure reading, which will not always be positive for literacy development. "We mustn't have the illusion that everything we

are doing will work," he said.

o Lack of understanding about the factors that influence funding. The low retention rate and length of time needed to acquire literacy impact upon decisions by funders. A major policy issue, according to Mikulecky, concerns incentives to improve recruitment and retention in adult literacy programs. The Department of Labor is considering additional research about what works for different people in different settings, rewarding and increasing support for proven high-quality programs, and taking a multi-strand approach to workplace literacy training. When literacy education is considered "charity," it is not asked to be accountable, Mikulecky pointed out, "but when it must compete with other social issues, such as AIDS or drug education, then more accountability will be asked."

o Recognition that workplace literacy has several levels. In the workplace, literacy can be for specific job performance, or it can integrate basic skills with technical training. It is not true, Mikulecky emphasized, "that a lot of workers cannot read stop signs, but it is true that a lot of them can't deal with new job situations." For example, workers dealing with more complex machinery need to take notes while being trained, "but in high school only those going on to college were taught sophisticated note-taking techniques." Federal and state monies increasingly are a smaller piece of the literacy program pie because business is making a major investment, he said. Consequently, decisionmaking over how the United States deals with education "has moved away from K-12 and higher education and toward the workplace. The resources are going to be placed on those who already are out of school." Along with this shift comes concerns about assessment. Programs will be justified in terms of how well they increase worker productivity, he said.

o The inadequacy of the delivery system in adult literacy. It is heavily dependent upon part-time teachers and is characterized by low levels of training and certification for teachers. Of the 82,000 instructors in federally funded programs, only 8% are full-time. Sixty-seven percent are part-time, and 25% are volunteers. Most instructors are moonlighting pre-collegiate teachers with no special training to teach adults. Mikulecky said that because of the lack of trained teachers, some program models that depend upon technology are better than those which use volunteers or part-time teachers.

o A range of learner issues. These include the learning disabled, who may represent at least 5% of the total number of illiterates and may "never be able to participate" in a literate society. Another problem is that the "crying of wolf" to get attention to the literacy problem has stigmatized learners and made it more difficult to reach them. Also, literacy advocates overlook the problem of how relationships change for adults who acquire literacy. For example, they may need extra support because they lose friendships and previous support groups.

However, Mikulecky ended with positive comments about the direction of the adult literacy movement. It has considerably more resources than a decade ago; it is taking an honest look at successes and failures; it is recognizing that different programs are needed for different problems; and it includes many new players, e.g. business, unions, policymakers, and especially community colleges, which "are becoming a stable source of programs and which can provide the next rung for learners."

LITERACY FROM A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

With the elevation of adult literacy to national prominence by the White House and the governors, literacy has moved out of the "charity" mode into the policymaking spotlight. As a result, the field is full of new issues. Will the interest in adult literacy be sustained? Will the resources be sufficient to meet expectations? What practices will need to change? What tensions between "mainstream" programs and those fostering multicultural diversity will need to be considered by policymakers and/or advocates?

Through several symposia focusing on national perspectives, conference participants debated many of these literacy issues from a multicultural point of view.

A Window of Opportunity

Policymaking begins in the local community, contended Jean Hammink, executive director of the Literacy Network, headquartered at Minneapolis, Minn. The current interest in adult literacy could become a "fad" which blossoms then fades unless strong community support and leadership provide a permanent foundation, she said. Ideally, communities need to decide what programs they want, setting the base for state and federal policymaking. The best way to do this, she said, would be to form community coalitions representing a broad cross-section of interests. These can have a ripple effect, all of the way up to Congress as it debates support for adult literacy programs.

Hammink also explored the policies that should be considered, as well as the process. They should be set, she said, "within the context of literacy as a development tool, rather than just job training." This means that literacy advocates must foster long-term thinking, planning and funding across all sectors--government, industry, education and in individual leadership.

For those particularly concerned about policies affecting multicultural, multilingual programs, a key to sensitive policy development is helping policymakers not only know the facts but also "experience" the strengths of programs supporting diversity. Policymakers "need a deeper understanding of multiculturism," Hammink said.

Further, she advised participants to "recognize the need for an understanding of global economic issues, such as trade, immigration and investment, which are and will affect educational needs of our adult population."

All literacy advocates need to develop networks, support diverse learner involvement in programs, and "involve the general public in becoming aware of the goals of the literacy effort," Hammink said. Specifically, she urged that the conference participants get behind Congressional proposals for a national adult literacy center that would be independent of any federal department and for state resource centers and planning councils. Finally, Hammink pointed out that federal funding should support bilingualism and second-language acquisition in order to foster economic competitiveness.

The 'Why' Behind Federal Efforts

A major influence upon Congressional efforts to expand adult literacy programs has been the report, Jump Start, authored by Forrest Chisman of the Washington, D.C., office of the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis.

The principal force leading to national action, he said, is the concern of business/industry over low literacy levels in the face of increasing competition and skill demands.

At a time of greater demand for literacy programs, however, the field is burdened by a "boutique" organization, he said. This causes skills to be taught in isolation and inefficient use of funds. Literacy needs to move into the "supermarket" category, Chisman, said, with "large-scale programs, individualized services, and alignment with other products (purposes)."

Those making policy for literacy programs need to set priorities and ensure an array of services, Chisman advised. However, he expressed concern about some of the problems to be faced by policymakers:

- o Territorial battles among literacy providers
- o Lack of collaboration among community and public agencies
- o The need to quickly expand staff development in the literacy field
- o The need to maintain flexibility in programming to meet emerging needs.

Despite broader views of the purposes of literacy, Chisman confirmed that the current increase in policymaking and funding stems from the concern to produce "smarter" workers at all levels. Literacy skill programs are not meeting, nor are they geared to meet, growing economic demands, he said.

More Specifics About Workplace Literacy

Because of dramatic changes in the workforce and in the workplace, "key players have now become aware of the problems, done some planning and devoted some resources to begin tackling the employee basic skills problem," according to Paul Jurmo. Senior program associate with the Business Council for Effective Literacy, Jurmo outlined the evolution of new "worker education" programs and recommendations for employers, unions and others concerned about workplace issues.

Despite all of the activity, Jurmo criticized the quality of workplace literacy programs. "Too often," he said, "employers or public policymakers suddenly become aware that some kind of basic skills problem exists in their workforce and then jump too quickly at implementing an employee basic skills effort without really understanding the problem or the range of solutions they have to choose from."

Ideally, they would first do their homework and define what the problems are. This would include, Jurmo said, "putting together a team of managers, workers, union representatives, and educators to get a clear picture of what basic skills workers really use in their jobs and in their lives outside of the job, and where the workers' strengths and limitations are."

Employers tell the Business Council for Effective Literacy that they are looking beyond the "3Rs." They want workers who can apply basic skills to problems, work in teams, and communicate verbally. Yet, with larger percentages of the workforce from multicultural backgrounds, "employers and employees are likely to be operating on several different sets of values and background knowledge," Jurmo pointed out. As well, employees come from different cultural backgrounds. This situation can create "crossed signals," tensions, and lost productivity, he noted.

Initial responses to the problems revealed in such an assessment may have more to do with rearranging the workplace than with literacy programs. For example, reading materials could be rewritten to be more easily understood, or jobs might be restructured to use the skills workers already have more efficiently.

However, among those deciding to establish a literacy program per se, Jurmo sees an important trend developing--a shift from academic to contextualized models. People are learning that traditional literacy programs, even those using new technologies, don't work very well, he said. Standardized curricula have little direct relevance to the particular job tasks facing employees. Even more troubling, according to Jurmo, standardized curricula "often are based on questionable assumptions about how people learn to read and write and place undue emphasis upon rote mastering of meaningless pieces of written language, rather than helping learners to develop strategies for making meaning out of written text."

On the other hand, the contextualized approach uses written language to accomplish real-world tasks of interest to the learner. The problem with this approach, Jurmo warned, is that it could become too narrowly focused on specific job skills, or overlook what a worker already knows. Consequently, a third alternative--known as worker-centered or participatory--provides multiple opportunities for workers to build on their strengths and use literacy broadly. "The worker is not seen as a mechanical appendage of a machine which merely needs some technical fine-tuning," he said.

Jurmo described several examples of the participatory approach, such as:

o A Honeywell plant in Phoenix and the Gateway Community College used interviews and videotapes with workers to build a basic skills curriculum tailored to worker needs, with follow-up videos providing an evaluation of each worker's progress.

o A Ford assembly plant in Ypsilanti, Mich., and educators from Eastern Michigan University created teams of shop-floor workers to discuss, write and read about job-related and personal issues, rather than use a pre-packaged curriculum. Teachers take their clues from workers' discussions and writings for selecting content materials for the workers. Writings by the workers are used in union publications and the local press.

o The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union has set up a worker basic

skills program focused on issues of importance to the workers, mostly Hispanic women immigrants, outside of work. By discussing and writing about transportation, health care, education and children, they develop literacy skills in both Spanish and English.

At the moment, Jurmo said, these participatory programs are in the minority because they require literacy practitioners with the "right kind of philosophical outlook and technical skills;" a management and union which are far-sighted enough to see the long-term value of this approach; and workers who have the "courage, energy, and time to take a chance at another form of education which probably is foreign to them."

He recommended specifically that:

o Employers and unions take time to get to know their workers and study what communications and basic skills problems actually exist, then set up thoughtful, quality programs.

o Public policymakers educate themselves about the employee basic skills problem, about viable alternatives, and the best use of funding over the long term.

o Vendors become allies in the development of appropriate methodologies, rather than competitors for scarce resources.

o The media provide more depth in its coverage of the literacy problem.

o Adult educators realize the considerable technical skills and clear visions needed to produce quality educational programs and negotiate for the components and resources to produce such programs, rather than settle for "quick-fix," inexpensive programs.

Finally, Jurmo said, workers need to want to build better lives for themselves and to construct programs that will help them.

The Assessment Problem

As more accountability is demanded of literacy programs, now competing with other national priorities for funding, the question of appropriate assessment becomes a crucial one. If nontraditional literacy programs--those that emphasize learner goals--are seen as the most effective, how can they be held accountable?

Ron Solorzano, field representative of the Educational Testing Service at Pasadena,

Calif., noted that there is no proven and precise measurement for determining an adult's reading level. Policymakers who want traditional assessment tools to be used in adult literacy programs need to change their thinking, looking at qualitative measures more than quantitative ones, he said.

Currently, adult assessment practices include grade-level equivalency, competency-based assessments, learner-goal assessments, those designed specifically for a certain workplace, and family literacy gains. In learner-goal assessments, standardized tests are not used; rather, one-to-one situations are pre- and post-tested, using free reading material available in most homes (clocks, TV guides, recipes).

Solorzano recommended the use of natural language in assessments more often. This would serve, he said, as a means of motivating the student to acquire a second language. "The student needs to build strengths in his or her own language, devote time to the strengths rather than the weaknesses, and stress goals, not competencies," he said.

Another important assessment consideration is that of program management. Programs are being developed, such as the Computerized Adult Literacy Matching Systems, that will help literacy programs keep data on all participants regarding student goals, beginning skills and progress on goals.

Literacy as Power

Workplace and individual empowerment issues are important to the literacy movement, but the basic issue, according to Nan Elsasser, president of Working Classroom, Inc., of Albuquerque, New Mex., is "literacy as a tool in the struggle for a more equitable society."

Describing the notion of "speech communities" determined by people's use of language (in Albuquerque, for example, there are at least four speech communities among Hispanics), Elsasser said that access to literacy depends on what speech community one belongs to. For 200 years, she noted, African-Americans in the South were denied access entirely (to schools, libraries, places where discourse took place). Until the middle of this century women were allowed a "Salvation Army" education but were not allowed generally to enter prestigious colleges. Native Americans were asked to "surrender their children to boarding schools whose

primary mission was to strip them of their language and culture...."

Because of such heritages, the belief that the United States is dedicated to developing an informed, literate society is more myth than fact, she contended. For most Americans, "school-related reading and writing is a tedious exercise in futility. Therefore, to change students' attitudes toward literacy, we have to change their social and cultural opportunities." She also said that reading materials still are not available to large numbers of adults on the fringe--for example, in rural areas or from different language backgrounds. Further, children who are put in remedial programs because their language background does not fit with standardized English leave school "with their inequalities intact," she charged.

Yet, Elsasser also pointed out that "if people really believe they have a stake in society, they will learn a standard English."

New speech communities need to be developed, she said. Those should:

o Conduct critical inquiry in a variety of languages or dialects.

o Organize curriculum around issues of interest and import to the local community.

o Engage students in discovering and producing knowledge for themselves and others.

o Encourage students and teachers to instigate and support actions which promote more equitable power relations in and out of the classroom.

Elsasser was unequivocal in supporting the "right to think, learn, and communicate" in one's own language. She described several successful programs with learners from different language backgrounds. Those involved in these new "speech communities" invent "new rules about what language they use, what they study, and who has knowledge and who distributes it," she said.

On the Razor's Edge

The current national agenda for adult literacy and its issues, funding and philosophies is vitally important because, basically, "reading and writing are political acts." This is the firm opinion of Donaldo Macedo, graduate program director of bilingual/ESL studies at the University of Massachusetts/Boston. He described the emphases upon standardization, competencies and testing rather than learning as a "conservative agenda" that will reinforce

already-existing "linguistic racism."

The real issues, according to Macedo, "are how do we become literate and for what reasons?" Many literacy programs concern themselves mainly with the mechanical acquisition of English skills, he said, when what is needed are programs "that affirm and allow language to recreate culture."

He illustrated his points with an anecdotal story of a young child, Alicia, who entered school full of hope and promise but could not speak the language of the classroom, and, therefore, could not tell her "stories." Her language, Macedo said, became one of silence. Unless children like Alicia are allowed to use their language and culture, "they will remain prisoners in their own culture."

Macedo's session produced lively comments, many of them about the dilemma of literacy advocates who want to be teachers, not "trainers" or technical assistants. Said a Navajo participant: "When you become a teacher, you should have passion and creativity." But Macedo replied that "there is no reward in the system for the passion or political clarity that you speak about."

Educators who believe in protecting a learner's language and culture must "keep one foot in the system and one out" because they walk on a razor's edge, commented another participant. They know they will be ignored and lose the power to impact upon the system if they try to change it too fast.

SUCCESSES AROUND THE COUNTRY

As the country's demography grows more diverse in more places, multicultural literacy advocates throughout the country are developing programs that meet the needs of their learners--and preserve their cultural/linguistic heritage.

A highlight of the El Paso conference was an afternoon of sessions where the philosophies and practices of these programs were shared.

Across Three Generations

Working Classroom, serving downtown Albuquerque, enrolls public school students, their parents and grandparents together, with the principal aim of keeping young people in school. For those with limited reading and writing skills in English, it uses the arts to help its learners become engaged in literacy.

The program offers bilingual writing, theater and art workshops, supervised by professionals. The participants see their writing published in books produced by an Albuquerque newspaper, their plays performed, and their art displayed publicly. In addition, the families who take part in the program are offered income and work experience in a yard and home maintenance business that project members manage.

Started by Nan Elsasser, who knocked on doors to recruit the first students, Working Classroom demonstrates that learning can take place in any language, she said. It also shows that people need to be involved in discovering and disseminating knowledge, use a curriculum that is of interest to them, and be taught in environments where they are not labeled as "illiterate."

Changing the Sheets, in Two Languages

The bilingual nature of the workforce is very evident in the hotel service industry, but sometimes it takes some convincing to get programs started.

Anne Lomperis, head of Language Training Designs for the Service World in Coral

Gables, Fla., summarized some of the arguments that need to be used to convince employers of the need for bilingual literacy programs tailored to the hotel industry.

Language difficulties contribute to a high turnover rate among employees, she said, yet the industry estimates each turnover costs a hotel about $1,500 in recruitment and training costs. Further, a good program takes time, an investment many employers have not been willing to make.

However, through literacy audits of the language needs of employees and a 10-week program held at the site, Lomperis has been able to show the benefits. Not only does the focus on literacy reduce turnover rates, but it leads to greater safety on the job and to more initiative from employees, she said. For example, given the problem of a guest needing a rubber sheet for a child who wets the bed, employees brainstormed together and recommended using a shower curtain.

Such programs also help employees become culturally sensitive, she said. Because of their own biases, employees from different cultures sometimes stereotype guests or misunderstand them, she said, but these problems can come out in the open and be dealt with through literacy programs.

'You Picked a Fine Time...'

Tomas Kalmar stumped his session for a few minutes, as participants tried to figure out the phonetic spelling on a handout, written by an Hispanic who put down what he heard in English. In an "aha!" moment, they realized the piece was the song "Lucille."

Kalmar, biliteracy specialist with the Adult Literacy Institute in Boston, used the example to illustrate the problems confronted by those trying to learn another language. Preferring the word "biliteracy" to describe multilingual approaches to learning, Kalmar described a native-language literacy project with migrant workers which produced "El Diccionario Mojado." The project involved Mexican migrants, working in southern Illinois, who eagerly attended classes in the evenings, Kalmar said. Writings from the project and the dictionary prepared by the workers are included in Kalmar's book, The Voice of Fulano.

This approach was much more successful and empowering, he said, than that of Boston's

Adult Literacy Initiative, started in 1983 with $1 million. It focuses on English-only, he said, and denies learners "the freedom to develop their own approach to language."

Using Television for Literacy

With one in four residents a high school dropout, San Antonio realized that the problem of illiteracy threatened the city's future economic growth. It decided to use all resources available, including television. Through a federal grant, San Antonio became one of four sites to demonstrate the use of TV to teach literacy.

Working with a local cable company, the San Antonio Coalition on Literacy developed bilingual TV classes with some creative programming. Each program, for example, included a news segment (the teacher/anchor become something of a local celebrity); and a dramatization of typical home and work situations. One vignette portrayed two aunts discussing an open house visit to their children's school. They talk about how important it is to become involved in school affairs, what they discussed with the teacher and how they are applying what they learned, such as helping with homework.

The goal is to bolster parents' confidence in dealing with school officials and others, said Elizabeth Garza, project director of the Satellite Centers for Adult Leadership and Education. "The program is always careful to treat parents with respect and to portray them as figures of authority," she said.

The remainder of each televised program discusses vocabulary and grammar used. Parents who do not have cable can use VHS tapes for study.

In addition, the program pays mileage for parents who attend classes at satellite centers, where skills are reinforced.

This non-traditional approach--using children to help recruit parents, providing accessible centers, integrating television with literacy education, and emphasizing parent leadership--is proving to be much more successful than the traditional school-model literacy program, Garza said.

Working Together in Houston

With the national interest in adult literacy growing, many groups within various communities have launched literacy efforts. Houston has one of the most extensive, but it is unique in several ways.

From the very beginning, the Houston effort has been viewed as a grassroots program that is well-coordinated across the city. A January 1988 report of a literacy task force called for a united effort to be coordinated by a new agency, the Houston READ Commission. With no direct funding from the city or state but reliance on the library system, community colleges and area businesses, the literacy plan had four objectives:

o To coordinate and support activities of local service providers and encourage new providers to get started

o To establish a citywide database to track the progress of literacy program participants

o To create a demonstration center and pilot projects that showcase what works in adult literacy

o To establish neighborhood learning centers in each part of the city.

In addition, the effort in Houston has been focused from the beginning on learner needs. "Our allegiance is to the learner," the Commission said in its report. As a result, emphasized Margaret Doughty and Barbara Kazden, the focus has been on quality programs for learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Resources are being invested in supporting and nurturing new ideas, using new technology, and sharing information about successful programs, Kazden said. "And we are building a network in which students and tutors can move from one program to another as their needs change."

THE NEXT STEPS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Respect the learner.

Form collaborations to foster cultural and linguistic diversity.

Advocate for a multicultural view among policymakers and funders.

These seem like simple goals, but they came up often in a half-dozen focus groups which took the presentations and discussions from the conference on "Literacy for a Global Economy" to a final point--what would be the next steps for the participants?

Each focus group dealt with a different theme, such as workplace and family literacy programs, assessments, funding, and theory. But their recommendations illustrated that adult literacy issues are cut from the same cloth, that one cannot talk about assessment without considering cultural differences; or design workplace literacy programs without discussing learner needs. Further, those who advocate cultural and linguistic diversity in literacy programs are beginning to realize that their agenda is as political as it is pedagogical, according to the focus group summaries.

Specifically, the recommendations included:

o Workplace literacy

A wide range of activities can be implemented to make workplace education more culturally appropriate, such as cross-cultural orientation sessions for workers or using workers' prior knowledge and experience to build programs. Adult educators need to develop more culturally appropriate programs, primarily by using workers to design them. Employers need to create a corporate culture in which difference is supported and ethnicity is respected. And all levels of governance should provide support for culturally appropriate programs and accountability.

o Literacy delivery systems

Effective literacy programs for adults with cultural and linguistic differences should be student-centered, individualized, interactive, use student work as evidence of progress, and

creative. They should be sensitive to native language literacy, and the varieties of language within major groups. Appropriate programs would use local history and culture, practical information, nonverbal communication and student products. Measures of success should include how much a student uses language outside of the classroom, the increase in student self-esteem, or increase in community involvement.

o Family Literacy

The presence of "literacy events" in the home of those from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds is more important than the languages spoken. Family literacy programs must convince parents of the importance of using language, no matter which language. Literacy program providers must find out what families want to use literacy for, be sensitive to the changes within families as literacy increases, develop effective methods to empower parents, collaborate with other programs, and support advocacy that leads to greater funding for family-based programs.

"The importance of this conference will be felt when we go back and develop discussions of issues in our own communities. There is a lot of work to do together. There is no last word."

Participant

LITERACY ON THE BORDER

Literacy is the centerpeice of the El Paso Community College. So believes Robert Shepack, president and inspiration for the multi-faceted program that reaches hundreds of people throughout the city and surrounding county. Because literacy is so important for human and economic development, the college's strategy was to form a broad range of partnerships and collaborations around literacy programs, he told the conference.

Echoing his comments, Enrique Solis, vice president of academic affairs for the college, commented that cultural and linguistic diversity is a way of life for El Paso.

This border city's experience with such diversity holds lessons for other communities because "its demographics today represent that of many urban areas in the United States tomorrow," he added. Five years ago the college launched a comprehensive Literacy Education Action program to demonstrate the role of community college resources in developing strong bi-literacy policies and practices. The El Paso community represents a major challenge--approximately one-fifth of its population, or 100,000 people, are defined as functionally illiterate because they are native-Spanish speakers.

The college's goal became one of developing culturally sensitive literacy programs that drew upon the strengths of learners, yet met the needs of the business community. With state funds, support from leading businesses in the community and its own resources, the college began to build an impressive range of literacy programs throughout the area.

In 1990, college leaders decided it was time to share what they had learned about possibilities and challenges of literacy efforts in a bilingual community. The conference on "Literacy for a Global Economy: A Multicultural Perspective" was planned for national participation, with a strong emphasis upon locally successful programs around the country. Participants came from ? states.

"If we are to move forward on creating a multicultural society," Solis told the conference, "we must be willing to share and work together."

The college's program began when Shepack appointed a member of the English faculty to work full-time on developing literacy services. The position later was institutionalized with a full-time director, currently Carol Clymer.

The first project of Literacy Education Action was to develop a college literacy tutoring program, now headquartered at the Literacy Center of the downtown campus of the college. This center, the hub of all literacy activities, uses a language experience teaching approach with a range of students--those who speak English, Spanish or both languages.

The program then began to develop a network of community literacy groups and support for other groups in literacy activities, including libraries and the Private Industry Council. It maintains a clearinghouse directory of all literacy-related activities in El Paso and works with local media on literacy awareness.

The accomplishments of Literacy Education Action program include:

o Volunteer tutoring. This program has trained more than 600 volunteer tutors. Currently it arranges one-on-one tutoring in 24 sites throughout the county. The Literacy Center holds free volunteer tutor training sessions every month.

o Small group instruction. Serving about 300 students a semester, the small group instruction program offers two-hour classes twice a week at all three campuses of the community college.

o TELE-LEA. This program offers live interactive televised literacy instruction at eight sites in El Paso, including a community housing project, the public schools, Levi Strauss plants, community centers, a public library and the college's three campuses. The 200 students served each semester have four levels of instruction available to them.

o Pre-vocational Literacy Project. This is directed at single parents and/or homemakers wanting to enter vocational training. Classes are held at several locations twice a week with the curriculum geared toward those wanting vocational training.

o Project FIEL. This project provides literacy instruction for parents of preschool and primary school children. It is an intergenerational literacy program to help both children and parents. The five-step curriculum includes literacy skills development as well as the development of appropriate role modeling behavior. It is being used in five school districts

in the El Paso area. Developed through a grant from the Texas Education Agency, Project FIEL is now being disseminated as a national model for bilingual families.

o Project Career. This program provides short-term job training for the learning disabled, ages 17-34. It integrates literacy with occupational skills in such areas as data entry, general office work and irrigation management.

o Refocus Employment Program. This project is developing a model program for postsecondary institutions to coordinate and integrate training or retraining of Department of Human Services clients who are seeking jobs.

o Workplace Literacy. Developed in partnership with the J&J Register Co. located in a rural community east of El Paso, this project is planning a model workplace literacy program to upgrade the basic skills of adult workers. It will be replicable in other companies with large percentages of limited-English-proficient workers.

o PIC grant. Serving Job Training Partnership Act participants, this program develops literacy, numeracy and English skills, primarily through computerized instruction, for job seekers. This is an open-entry/open-exit program offering about 20 hours of instruction a week for students with limited-English proficiency.

In less than five years Literacy Education Action has made its mark, not only within the college but also within the total community. Through the leadership of the college, business community support and commitment by all to bicultural values, El Paso is a border town reaching far beyond its own borders to influence state and national literacy movements.